



Testimony of

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IAMAW Local 1746

Labor & Public Employees Committee

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SB 983 An Act Concerning Unemployment Benefits for Striking Workers

Good afternoon, Senator Kushner, Representative Sanchez, Senator Sampson, Representative Ackert, and the distinguished members of the Labor & Public Employees Committee. My name is Joe Durette, I live in South Windsor, CT. I work as a Quality Inspector at Pratt & Whitney in East Hartford. and I am a Health & Safety Representative for Machinists Union Local 1746. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of SB 229 An Act Concerning Unemployment Benefits for Striking Workers.

I have been employed by Pratt & Whitney for nearly 31 years, and I am a second-generation employee, my father having worked at the same plant from the early 1960's until 1992. I have been around the union hall and the factory for most of my life. I'm not quite old enough to remember the trolley cars that used to travel up and down Main Street outside the factory, but I am old enough to remember the tracks in the median that they used to travel upon. When I was a kid in the 1960's, every three years my dad would tell my siblings and me "don't expect too much for Christmas this year." The reason for that was because the union contract expired every three years on the first Sunday in December. And if there was a strike, well, there would be no money for Christmas. Or heating oil. Or enough grocery money to feed a family of seven.

The Machinists Union struck Pratt & Whitney in 1960 for nine weeks. I wasn't born until two years later, but from what I've heard it was a very contentious and bitter strike. After the dust cleared, somehow the union ended up with that December contract date, although I'm not clear on the details. I remember asking my father when I was a teenager, "Why doesn't the union just negotiate a better contract date?" and the answer was that the company would never agree to change the date. You see, it's all about leverage. Sure, the union had a right to strike, but the membership would pay dearly for it if they did, with lost wages and benefits that could take months or years to recoup, while walking the picket line in the cold of winter. In 1985 there was another vote to strike, but it was not effective for the union, as each Connecticut local had its own strike vote and not every Local could muster the two-thirds vote necessary to strike. It wasn't until 2001, some 40 plus years after the 1960 strike that some charismatic local union presidents and negotiators rallied all of the Connecticut workers to unite and strike the company again.

We took some criticism for that strike. It was December, just three months after the attack on 9/11, and some people called us selfish and unpatriotic. But it wasn't about higher wages. I believe skyrocketing healthcare costs played a part, but to me it was about showing the company that we *could* strike. We were out of work for two weeks, and Mother Nature smiled kindly upon us with some unseasonably warm temperatures, although being a 3rd-shift strike captain I still managed to get snowed upon somehow. When we ratified that contract two weeks later, with improvements, we felt like we had achieved something positive, but it wasn't without sacrifice. Of course, one of the things we had going for us was our skilled workforce, because there wasn't a plethora of machinists and tradesmen ready to walk in and replace us, but not every union is so fortunate in that aspect.

Many union workers in various sectors are still living paycheck to paycheck, and that gives their companies leverage over them. Nobody wants to strike, but when the workforce is up against a ruthless company that seems to hold all the cards, sometimes a strike is the only card left to play. SB 229 can help working families in times when all other options to negotiate fairly with their companies have failed, and alleviate the uncertainty and stress of caring for their loved ones when the decision to strike is on the table. I urge the Committee to support this bill.